

[Lore of Department Store Workers]

Beliefs & Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK 11 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS OF WORKER 29 1/2 Morton Street #2B

DATE February 2, 1939

SUBJECT Lore of Department Store Workers

1. Date and time of interview January 31, and February 1, 1939.
2. Place of interview 112 East 19th St. (Union Headquarters, Dept. Store Workers Local 1250)
3. Name and address of informant Irving Fajans (Prefers use of Union address, 112 E. 19 St.)
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. Clarene Michaelson. Same address
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Ping-Pong Room at Union Headquarters.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 29 1/2 Morton St. #2B N. Y. C.

DATE February 2, 1939

SUBJECT Lore of Department Store Workers

TO BE OBTAINED

1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

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7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant
10. Other Points gained in interview

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 29 1/2 Morton St. #2B N. Y. C.

DATE February 2, 1939

SUBJECT Lore of Department Store Workers

(COLLECTED FROM MEMBERS OF DEPARTMENT STORE WORKERS UNION,1250.)

Irving Fajans, of 112 East 19th Street, who has been a Department Store Worker for over five years, greeted me with the smiling courtesy which has become habitual with him in dealing with customers. Asked if the enforced rule of politeness to all comers did not desert him in after-work hours, he replied:

"Oh, no, Miss! I guess it's just got to be natural for me to act polite. You see the first thing a counter man learns is to keep his personal thoughts and opinions to himself. Whatever

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we may think of a customer, we have to postpone expressing it until the customer is out of earshot.....Some of them make extreme demands on a fellow's patience, though. Like the time I was behind the cigar counter and a woman holding a squirming brat asked for a 3 cent stamp, and then-asked me to hold the kid while she fished for the pennies in her purse.”

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Mr. Fajans has made his own classification of customers:

“1. The customer who enters the store periodically to buy the same article at the same price — such as socks or handkerchiefs. This type, you always know what he's going to ask for before he tells you.

2. The kind who tells you she knows exactly what she wants, and then takes two hours to make up her mind.

3. The type that's in a hurry — has to make a train, or has an appointment, and then dawdles around, hums and haws over everything you show her, finally walking out without buying.

4. The type who will slip in just before the closing bell rings and take up the salesman's time after hours — of course very apologetic about it.

5. The type who is purchasing an article for someone else, without knowing size, age, or sometimes, sex.

6. The 'match it' type. She'll come in with a smudge of lipstick on a piece of paper, for instance, and want you to match it exactly in the article.

7. The type who tells you she has seen the same thing in another store at a much lower price — but buys from you just the same.

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8. The customer who will place a C.O.D. order for a large amount, sometimes 3 hundreds of dollars, to impress the clerk, and then the merchandise is returned the next day.

9. Another type anxious to impress you, is the woman who buys some cheap article like washcloths, say, for 11 cents a piece, and then explains that she is choosing the inexpensive cloths because she is "buying for my maid".

Mr. Fajans has been employed in several of New York's chief Department Stores, including Macy's in New York, May's in Brooklyn, Ohrbachs / Hearns , and various Woolworth and Grand stores. He helped organize unions in all these stores, and has participated in many strikes and sit-downs. He remembers the famous March 1937 strike staged by Grand employees throughout New York City, which lasted for eleven days.....

"The leaders kept the hour of the strike secret until the last minute, so that news of it would not leak out to the management. The management had refused to negotiate with our committee, and the workers had voted for a sit-in as a demand for shorter working hours and better working conditions."

"At 11:30 A.M. on March 14, the whistles were blown in every Grand store in New York, and the workers each finished their sales and folded their arms, refusing to wait on any more customers. Practically 100 percent of the workers joined us, and most of the stores almost immediately closed their doors. We were prepared to stay in for a month if necessary.

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Arrangements had been made for food and bedding to be brought in, and the workers notified their families by phone that they would be away from home indefinitely. We had cots brought in and blankets, electric burners for coffee, and plenty of eats. Although there was food and other things we might have used in the store, none of our people touched any sort of merchandise during the strike. Two engagements were announced during

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the time we sat in, and we held parties. We even held a marriage ceremony there for a couple who decided to get married during the strike. The girls dressed up the bride, and the fellows groomed the groom, and we had a priest sent for, and married them.”

“It was pretty cold, being early spring, and the blankets we had were not enough so we had to huddle together at nights. Some of the fellows slept on the counters. There were some canary cages in the store, and we kept the birds fed....they'd trill and wake us up early every morning. We had names like checkers and cards, and we had a radio, and danced to the music.”

“The strike held out over Easter week, and it happened that some of our people were Italians and Irish Catholics, so since they couldn't attend services, we held Easter Services for them in the store.”

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“Nobody left the store, except the committee to contact the management, for eleven days. The girls held out just as well as the fellows, and everyone tried to be gay and have as good a time as possible. Luckily, no one in our store got sick during strike. The management finally heard our committee and met our demands — largely as a result of the publicity our sit-down had gotten all over the country.....”

“Another strike that got a lot of publicity was the May Department Store strike in Brooklyn, there the girls got up on the elevator structure and shouted that the boss was unfair. On Lincoln's birthday, one of the boys dressed up as Abraham Lincoln was parading on the picket line. A policeman came up to him and said, ‘I don't know who this Abe is, but anyhow you're under arrest!’”

“During the Ohrbachs strike a couple of years ago, two salesgirls pulled a neat stunt that resulted in the granting of our demands. There was a dinner being held for Mr. Ohrbachs at the Hotel Astor, at which he spoke. Now Ohrbach is supposed to be a big philanthropist, contributes to a lot of charities and such. Well, when he was spouting about some of these

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public charity funds, two girls who had crashed the dinner by coming in borrowed evening gowns, climbed up on the balcony and chained 6 themselves to the railing. Nobody had noticed them, and suddenly they began shouting in the middle of Ohrbach's speech: 'Charity begins at home! Give your employees shorter hours and better pay!' Of course, there was a big hubbub, and the girls were arrested. But the papers carried a big story, and the boss had to grant our demands to appease public opinion.'

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From Miss Clarene Michaelson, organizer for local 1250 of the Department Store Workers Union, obtained two poems written by Department Store Workers. She grants permission to print them. A SHOP GIRL'S SAGA

By

BETTY MINDLING, (OF NORTON'S DEPARTMENT STORE) A salesgirl's life is not so hot, Even in the better Department shop. Deposited each morning from the subway crop, To wade in the public auction lot. With a smile, we stand aimed to please, No matter how feet ache and pain; Though selected clientele come to tease, The show must go on—there are sales to gain. Then there are those ladies of leisure, Who always dally, way after the closing bell; To serve — we assure them is really a pleasure; Though we would as lief tell them to go to h—. If in manner we rival the Hollywood glamour, 7 And put on the act to close a deal, It's the unwritten law — by popular clamour To season all sales with a dash of sex appeal. The run on the stock is simply terrific, To keep it appealing is quite a day's work; Summed up, our calling must be prolific, To total the degrees of Department Store Clerk. BONUS PARTY

BY

SUE, (OF THE 5 & 10 ON FOURTEENTH STREET) Sure they take us out on parties, When we win our bonus monies; But we guess they only do it To make us think they're

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honeys. We must work hard to win it, But it should go in our pay; And the cheapest way to buy us Is the bonus party way. Sure we'll work hard as we must work But we know what to do; And we will have our parties And much better parties too. So sign up with the union For what we win is ours And we wouldn't have to listen to The bosses hearts and flowers.

Printed in ' Hot-Shots '

5 & 10 cent Weekly

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' The 1250 News ', Department Store Workers Weekly, prints a column called ' Under the Counter ', to which the Union Workers contribute items of gossip picked up on the job. A place has been provided under certain counters at Hearns on Fourteenth Street and in the Bronx, Norton's, Hershey Warehouse, and the Woolworth Stores, where the salesclerks can deposit their contributions, to be collected by reporters for The 1250 News. Some excerpts from ' Under The Counter ' follow:

"Who was the smart girl in Dresses 32, who told an executive she chewed gum to keep her temperature down?....."

"Colonial room: The Bridal Suite at the Waldorf has been reserved for February 19....who was the blonde with my Danny on Dyckman Street?...."

"Al Davis of Liquor is a proud husband — nice girl, Al, treat her rights....."

"A customer in the cafeteria removed her false teeth and left them on her plate. When she came back, Frank gave them to her on a nice clean plate..."

"Saleslady: May I serve you Modom?"

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Customer: I want a dress mit a circle bottom that I should wear in 9 the afternoon ven I cut it short.....”

“Who is the mysterious man who comes in every day to look in the mirror and watch the ladies in the fitting room? Naughty, naughty!.....”

“Customer in the Optical Department told Miss Blake 'Sure an' I'll never get another pair of Hearn glasses — they get all steamed up!.....”

“Mr. Jimmy Traynor has given blood to Tessie, the basement matron, who is very ill.....”

Boners: Advertisement: Shirley Temple Rain Cape, size 9-12 Special Price.....Customer approaches information clerk at Hearn's..... Customer: Where can I find Shirley Temple?

Information Clerk: I'm sorry Madam but Shirley Temple is not in this store. Customer: Oh yes she is.....I read it in the advertisement that she is to be in the store from 9 to 19 12 a.m. 2(?)

“Miss Buff, our very efficient head of the Collars, is always around the men's necks.....”

Customer, examining bread box,: “What I want to know is can my cockroaches get in through these holes?”

Manager: “Well Madam, that depends on the size of your cockroaches.”

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“Things salesgirls put up with:

Customer: “I want to buy a temperature.”

Clerk: “A what, Madam?”

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Customer: "A temperature. Temperature!"

You guessed it, she wanted a thermometer.

"Male customer: Where kinifoindeboidfood?"

Salesgirl: "I beg your pardon?"

Customer: "Where kinifoindeboidfood? What you feed boids wid."

/ How were we to know? /

Customer: "Where are the roving stairs?"

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PERMISSION TO REPRINT THESE EXCERPTS FROM 1250 NEWS granted by Miss Michaelson.